

Who'd be a teacher?

Isaiah 50:4-9a

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-end

Trinity 16 2024, All Saints Kings Heath



If I came back from my travels with statues like this for All Saints I wonder if you might recoil, especially as it's nearly life size. They're really not to everyone's taste. But this one is arguably quite subversive, insistent and politically charged. The saint is seated at her desk, quill in hand. The sculptor and the patron who commissioned it, probably for a convent in Granada, wanted to emphasise her managerial skill, her scholarship and her intellect. It's late C17, by Jose Risueno, crafted just a century after Teresa's life, and a couple of decades after her canonisation. Teresa would indeed be recognised by the Pope as a "Doctor of the Church" but that was not until, wait for it, 1970, and Pope Paul VI. The Doctors of the Church are a select few given the title as "theologians of outstanding merit and acknowledged saintliness." (Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church). So think of the boldness of this artistic commission, with the Inquisition, who had grilled her about her teaching and worryingly protestant smelling reforms, belittling her spiritual writings as madness, or of the devil; the organisation still going a hundred years later, it's quite something to install this statue to inspire any aspiring women scholars in the convent and reminding any male priestly or Inquisitorial visitors that Teresa was a teacher, a scholar whose writing mattered and competent, authoritative Manager.

As a lively, attractive woman, Teresa loved the banter of the Parlour and flirted eagerly with men, gaining energy from conversation, persuading people of her cause, founding Carmelite convents, securing sponsors and the support she knew full well she needed of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Yet she agonised over the flirtatious pride that relished this conversation and sometimes berated herself for it.

Her language of devotion to Jesus is candid and energetic, overwhelming flirtation with lesser men with flirtation, passion and devotion to him that is unashamedly sensual addressing her beloved, in the tradition of Song of Solomon. She records her ecstatic experience of the divine leaving her inner life with us as a literally open book. The Inquisition, of course, were highly suspicious of this and quizzed her about the visions. She, however, had gone their first, interrogating herself much harder and more critically than they, suspicious herself that her visions may be of the devil. It was the overwhelming sense of love for and love from God that followed these experiences that convinced her they were of God.

She proved herself both passionate and practical, truth-speaking, heart-searching, lamenting suffering, worshipping with every aspect of her being. Meanwhile, she was teaching and organising, leaving convents that would endure the test of time and Inquisition. Even with all those men in the way, her harshest criticisms were for herself. She reached out eagerly to any, like John of the Cross, who got what she was about, using anyone who didn't but might be persuaded to help the cause. She listened to John's advice and gave him hers; they encouraged and admonished each other as teachers who listen.

I wonder if she would recognise herself in Isaiah 50: the teacher who listens and learns eagerly, the better to teach others and lift them up from weariness? A teacher mocked by the powers that be? A teacher clinging with passion to God, knowing her beloved would vindicate her? A teacher determined, face like flint?

I hope she would recognise herself, or allow us to recognise her. I think she would be quicker, though, to reach for James' devastating account of the power of speech, with his brilliant waves of metaphors: the bridle, the rudder, the forest fire, the untameable beast. She would search her own heart for hypocrisy, while wryly noting it in the stern, jealous men who investigated her or stood in the way of her ambition which she knew to be both godly and pride-full. Her agonising heart searching laid bare on pages written at her desk. Movingly you can see her handwriting in framed letters to St John of the Cross kept at the church in Ubeda where he died, not far from the Synagogue I told you about last week.

Time has tested Teresa of Avila and at last the Church realised what a gift she was and is. In the thick of life and politics, though, it is hard to know if a charismatic figure like her is indeed a good or bad thing. She shows if we're honest it's hard to know for ourselves if we're on the right lines or deluding ourselves.

In today's Gospel we find Jesus and Peter in that agonising realm of self analysis. I wonder, what was the harshest thing anyone has ever said to you? Did it feel harsh because it was unfair or cruel, or because it contained truth you didn't want to hear? Or was it a bit of both?

Last week we heard Jesus's harsh rebuff to the Syrian mother asking for his help. This week, if that wasn't enough, we hear him call Peter "Satan" – the deceiver, who had tempted him with publicity stunts that looked appealing at first glance, but he knew would corrupt his compassionate vocation. It is hard to imagine how hurt Peter must have felt, and may wonder how long it took him to accept the truth in the sharp rebuke, such a stark contrast to the acclamation he had made calling Jesus the "Christ," the anointed one of God.

What's the harshest thing you have ever said to anyone? Was your tone and the strength of what you said warranted by the seriousness of the issue you felt they needed to face? How far was your harshness the result of your own need or fear about the issue you raised?

It is striking to think of Jesus, who goes on to talk openly about his journey to the cross, feeling sorely tempted to agree with Peter, and Satan who tempted him with self-serving populism. That temptation described in chapter 4 didn't only happen once. It would surely accompany him throughout his ministry. He asked his Father to take the cup of suffering from him, but then accepted his calling. Perhaps it was his anxiety about the rejection he was to experience that raised the heat in this exchange with his friend. It may be that, like Jesus, your harshness was born of love for the person you spoke to, or they to you.

Some people speak critically of a political regime and are accused of treason, and yet they bravely cry out precisely out of loyalty and love for their homeland. Conversely, it is terrible when we see brutal behaviour justified on the grounds of some loyalty when it is in reality a betrayal. Hamas' actions on October 7th betrayed their own people catastrophically. Israel's brutality in response betrays her own integrity and puts her own people in ever greater danger.

Isaiah and Jesus encourage fortitude and patience when we suffer for speaking truth while James warns of the power of speech to cause a fire, to mislead, to hurt. With such daunting readings we well might be struck dumb and rooted to the spot, too afraid to say or do a thing. We are surely compelled to pray for teachers of every kind because on the one hand every moment of doubt or agonising over truth reminds us there can hardly be a more important vocation. Equipping people with the power of speech and understanding is doing what Jesus did last week when he gave the deaf, must man his hearing and his speech. And yet the consequences of leading people astray through the power of teaching are potentially so terrible we hardly dare start.

But we can be encouraged that, while Peter said something Jesus needed harshly to challenge, he did speak out of love for his teacher. When Jesus spoke harshly, he spoke out of his human vulnerability. Peter did press on and became one of the greatest teachers of the faith (see his generous oratory in Acts). He might have been silenced at first, but he was able over time to turn his hurt into wisdom. Jesus did press on, literally taking up his cross, letting go of his life, to be raised to glory for all our sakes.

We can be inspired that, Teresa pressed on, did teach, did write, did organise and left an astonishing legacy which eventually the Church gave thanks for. She could have chosen a quieter life, staying under the radar, but she stepped up, outshining the church's sexism. Her heart searching was patronised by contemporaries and to this day can be patronised by post Freudian superiority, dismissing her erotic spiritual idiom with a self-congratulatory sneer. Men have always been threatened by female potency. Yesterday's funeral for Rebecca Cheptegei in Uganda is an unbearable example of the ultimate consequences of a culture underwriting the assumption of female inadequacy, combining with male fear of impotence in a devastating way. Her murder was an act of extreme envy and fear, but it's of the same stuff as Inquisitorial fear, both resorting to flames to express their inadequacy. Surrounded by such forces, Teresa searched her heart, listened to God, never claimed perfection, but pressed on.

She caught the burden and gift of her calling, crying out to Jesus like this:

O true Lover, with how much compassion, with how much gentleness, with how much delight, with how much favour, and with what extraordinary signs of love You cure these wounds, which with the same darts of this same love you have caused! O my God, and my rest from all pains, how entranced I am!

That could seem like an unsettling description of coercive control, but set in the body of her work we see a woman of real agency, potency, intellect, challenging God as much as adoring.

Emboldened by the hope Jesus' resurrection inspires, ringing out in Peter's mature voice, we take courage to raise our voices with Teresa in candid, heart searching prayer whatever our vocation, but especially our prayer for all who step up to teach.

INTERCESSIONS

At home: Having heard in James the impossibly heavy responsibility of teaching, and the power for good or ill of speech, we pray for all whose vocation is to teach, and for young people to be equipped with speech to express themselves well; equipped with emotional and ethical intelligence to match the knowledge they learn.

Having heard from Isaiah of a teacher persecuted and mocked for speaking truth, we pray for all political prisoners, especially for opposition spokespeople arrested and imprisoned in Venezuela and Russia.

Having heard from Jesus the call to deny self and take up the cross, we pray for any who have had to give up something precious in order for something even more precious to become possible. We pray for any who, by clutching to tightly onto someone or something risk losing them.

Among those who are unwell we pray for Rob Morris, Wendy Turner, Dharshi, Syed and Thandi. As Teresa faced you frankly with the reality of pain, hear our distress. As you helped Teresa turn sorrow into prayer and prayer into praise, kindle hope in all who suffer.

Among those celebrating new beginnings, we pray for all young people leaving home for University, or beginning a new course at college. We pray for parents and siblings letting go of them in order for their learning to flourish. We pray for Kurt and Kerriann married here yesterday.

Among those who have died we remember Elaine Apps. We remember all who mourn Rebecca Cheptegei, and pray that Ugandan heart searching will not cease as her funeral fades from the news. Keep our hearts, and the Church's heart searching for those whose calling we underestimate at our peril.